

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS ON THE OCCASION OF THE SEVENTY-FIFTH ANNIVERSARY OF  
THE COLLEGE LANGUAGE ASSOCIATION IN ATLANTA, GEORGIA, MARCH 29, 2012

Author(s): Warren J. Carson

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BY WARREN J. CARSON, PH.D.,  
CLA PRESIDENT, 2010-12

CLA Family, it is a joy for me to welcome you to the Seventy-Fifth Anniversary of the founding of the College Language Association. It is indeed fitting that we are gathered in Atlanta, Georgia, “the city of a hundred hills” that W. E. B. Du Bois celebrated and critiqued in his seminal work *The Souls of Black Folk*, for it is here in Atlanta that Dr. Hugh Morris Gloster, the convener of the group of educators that was the genesis of CLA, labored for so many years as President of Morehouse College. Indeed, we invoke the spirit of the founders, and we began at 9 a.m. this morning what will be two and one-half days of pouring intellectual libations in memory of and in tribute to their example.

Our theme this year, “In the Spirit of Sankofa,” is also especially fitting, as we pause during this traditional rite of spring in the life of CLA-ers to celebrate our beloved organization at seventy-five, and to chart our path going

forward. For those who are not fully familiar with the Sankofa concept, please allow me a few minutes to elucidate it. Sankofa means to “Go back and retrieve,” and it is a symbol based on a mythical bird that flies forward with its head turned backwards. This posture reflects the African belief that the past serves as a guide for planning the future, or the wisdom in learning from the past in building the future. Sankofa is also based on the belief that there must be movement with the times, but as the forward march proceeds, the gems must be picked from behind and carried forward on the march. Finally, the symbol signifies the rear guard, the section on which survival of the society and the defense of its heritage depends. Indeed, this is a fitting text for this presidential address. I want to make three brief points, and then I’ll be finished.

When we look back at CLA, what do we see? We are an organization that was founded on the same principle that guided many of our ancestors as they contemplated freedom in and before the Day of Jubilee: “I’ll find a way, or make one!” When Dr. Gloster and others did not see a place for themselves in other professional organizations that affirmed their identity and humanity, what did they do? They came together and formed the basis of the organization that we continue to serve, even as it continues to serve us in so many ways. The history of CLA is documented in several places, though not much has been written about the organization in the twenty-first century. Yet, the organization does live on, continuing to survive, and in some cases thrive, on the principles of the founders, who sought in large part to contribute to building a nation of black teachers and scholars in the languages and literatures, that we might positively change the lives of our students and do what we can to make this a better world for all of us. When we look back at CLA, we see foresight, determination, collaboration, commitment to education, fearlessness, generosity, and, yes, love—truly, these things

must be among the gems that we continue to pick up and carry forward as our march to the future continues.

When we look at our present CLA, what do we see? We see a wonderfully diverse, talented and committed group of teachers of languages and literatures, and much to my delight, a growing number of students, both graduate and undergraduate. Our membership and attendees range from those who were the second generation of CLA members to those who are just now experiencing CLA and the role that it can play in their young intellectual lives. As did many of you, I had what I now know was the honor to have been taught and mentored by members of the old guard. I know now, as do many of you, that I would not have been able to do what I do without their having done what they did. And I am grateful for their having shown me the road and how to walk it, but most importantly for letting me know that while I may have to walk by myself sometimes, I would not be alone. When is the last time we shared that lesson with one of our students? But I am getting ahead of myself!

I am admittedly on the youngish end of what is now the old guard of CLA, having spent thirty-seven years in the academy and having crossed over relatively unscathed into the land of the sexagenarians, and like many of my CLA family, the question of legacy seeps into my thoughts. You—we—are a tremendously accomplished group of people. Many have done more than we ever thought possible; have gone places and done things that our ancestors, even those who birthed CLA, could barely imagine; have been able to stock our scholarly and financial storehouses with plenty; have, perhaps, paid some of our dues. Yes, we are here, and that brings me to my third point.

Who will know of our arrival? And, more to the point, who will care? We do not do an especially good job when it comes to telling the CLA story. Oh, I don't mean with writing our historical notes or gathering artifacts for the CLA archives, though we need to do better with both of

those. I mean how and to what degree we carry the CLA story and live the CLA creed outside of our annual conventions. Just think—if we—each one of us—went forward on Sunday to our colleges and universities, to our other professional organizations and affiliations, to our scholarly production activities, to our charitable giving, with the pride, enthusiasm, and commitment that we have demonstrated for the few days we have been together here, people would know that we are CLA, and they would have to care!

Toward that end, let us rededicate ourselves to CLA through the Spirit of Sankofa; that is, let us always be mindful of our past, picking up those gems and carrying them forward, accepting our present place as the rear guard for CLA, protecting what we must for the advancement of good teaching and good learning in the languages and literatures and cultures of the world, remembering the special place of HBCUs in the life of this organization, and continuing to keep honest all institutions where we labor. We do these things to move us forward toward our next milestone, when we will gather to celebrate our first millennium. Oh what a day that will be!

In closing, let me say that one of my South Carolina colleagues chides me often about my sermonizing. I'm sorry, but that is the tradition that I come from—high-church Black Baptists on one side, unfettered AME Zions on the other—and I realize that in large part I am preaching to the choir. So on this Seventieth Anniversary, I salute our founders, in whose vision we walk, our past presidents and all other officers who have served this venerable organization with passion and distinction, all members who share with us this year the fruits of their scholarly labors, those who support us with their attendance and quiet support of the profession, and the students whose hands we must prepare for the carrying forward of CLA.

So much for the sermon; now let us pass the plate and let us contribute to it in good measure our remaining en-

ergies in the classroom, in service to CLA and other professional organizations, in our scholarly and creative endeavors. Let us contribute to the plate of mentorship—identifying, recruiting, and embracing students—the lifeblood of CLA—indoctrinating them in the CLA way. Let us contribute to the plate of collegiality, knowing that one or a few can do the work, but the load is easier to bear when shared. Let us contribute to the plate of professional and personal regard, one for another, esteeming others at least as well as we do ourselves.

And now, by way of benediction, please know what an honor it is for me to have served as your president for the last two years. You are wonderful colleagues, supporters, encouragers—a true family of the highest order. In the Spirit of Sankofa, then, let us ever move forward, carrying our precious things with us, for we are CLA!

*University of South Carolina Upstate,  
Spartanburg, South Carolina*